Dissertation Prospectus Abstract

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Community-based universal prevention has been identified as an effective approach for decreasing rates of many adolescent and young adult problem behaviors, including delinquency, violence, and substance use, yet few of these approaches have been examined for their effectiveness in preventing gang association and problematic outcomes among gang-associated youth. As the consequences of gang association can be both severe and long-term, identifying effective prevention tools is instrumental in reducing the scope and impact of the nation's gang problem by providing researchers and community workers with a broader set of effective tools to reduce the prevalence of gangs in their communities. This dissertation proposes to examine the effectiveness of a community-based universal prevention system, Communities That Care (CTC), in addressing gang association through the following three aims: 1) it will examine the prevention system's supporting theoretical model, the Social Development Model, for its applicability in identifying direct and indirect pathways predictive of gang association for rural and small town youth; 2) it examines the degree to which CTC works universally in decreasing levels of targeted risk for problem behaviors (delinquency, violence, substance use) similarly among gang members, gang-associated youth, and non-members; and 3) it will examine the extent to which CTC is effective in preventing gang association, as well as assess the universality of its effects in preventing related problematic outcomes for gang-associated youth and non-members.

Data come from the longitudinal panel study of the Community Youth Development Study, a community-randomized trial of the Communities That Care system. 4407 youth from 24 small communities (12 intervention, 12 control) in seven states were surveyed regarding risk and protective factors for youth problem behaviors from fifth grade until age 23. Structural Equation Modeling, Hierarchical Latent Growth Modeling, and Hierarchical Linear Modeling will be used to test each aim, respectively. Multiple imputation will be used to address missing data due to non-response and analyses will control for a broad number of demographic factors and early levels of problem behavior to assess intervention effects.

Products resulting from this dissertation will include multiple scholarly papers and national conference presentations. In addition, the results of this dissertation will address gaps in research and practice regarding the mechanisms of gang association and successful intervention approaches, leading to more efficacious prevention programming.